Patrycja Murzyniec-Kamińska

A Bell Rusted Red

With every step taken on the creaky stairs and every shuddering breath, I knew I was getting closer to death. I could feel it watching me with its dilated pupil, excited and ready to hunt its prey. It had already claimed one soul and I wasn't going to let it take more. But I wasn't going to die. Not yet.

"Except it was too late—it always was."

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It all began with a little mousy boy living across the street.

We'd known each other since we were six. My parents, too busy to keep an eye on me, would drop me off at his house whenever they were buried under work. That was most days, except the weekends. His mother didn't mind. She'd been stuck at home ever since I could remember, a car accident left her limping and all she could do was to care for her son at home. She seemed almost relieved that her son finally had a human friend.
You see, Charlie was always the quiet, delicate boy that the older kids loved to torment. If you passed his garden, you'd find him sitting on the grass, stroking his cat while the rest of us ran off to the football pitch. I wasn't allowed down there when my parents were away at work, so I was stuck with my neighbor whether I wanted it or not.
Don't get me wrong, he was kind and never dared to upset anyone. He just didn't care for games or messing around. The only thing that mattered to him was his cat, a brown wiry creature which brought dead mice as gifts on their doormat.
Personally, I never hated animals. Yet, there was something different about this cat. It unnerved me every time I visited them. The cat never had a name, so I called it Eerie. Because that was just what it was. Its eyes too knowing, too piercing. Unlike an animal or even human being, like a haunting entity. Sometimes I swore I saw it observing us from the corner of my eye. But whenever I turned around, there was nothing to be seen. Another reason why I disliked my daily visits at Charlie's. I was surely his best "human" friend. But he wasn't mine. At school I avoided him at all costs, I didn't want the other kids to see us hanging out together. I wasn't keen on becoming their next victim. They called him names, shoved him and dunked his head in the toilet during school breaks. And I just stared at the floor. I told myself that looking away wasn't the same as joining in.

He never asked why. I wish he had.

Because that silence of his and mine was the beginning of my biggest regret.

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At the end of sixth grade my parents decided that it was time to focus more on family instead of work. My poor grades and constant calls from school convinced them that they had neglected their only son for far too long. My father took a job offer in Georgia, so all that was left was to pack our

things and leave our little town. I don't recall being upset about the news of us moving away from Lexington. I was glad that someone had finally noticed me and especially glad that I wouldn't have to go to Charlie's weird house anymore.

On my last day before moving out I was finished and all packed up. The boxes filled with toys, school books and clothes were ready for the journey to Georgia. After my mother carefully examined the boxes to see if I had packed properly, she nodded approvingly.

"All right, you may go and see your friends now. Make sure to return before five," she said. "And don't forget to say goodbye to Mrs. Sanders."

"Sure will!" I lied and dashed out of the house before she changed her mind. A small pinch in my chest told me I should go and say goodbye to Charlie's mother, but I was already late for the meeting with the guys and didn't want to lose any more time.

I found them at our usual spot, in the woods by the highroad. It was nothing special, but there weren't many interesting places in Lexington for kids our age back then, especially since the older boys kept the football pitch to themselves. So someone had hung a tire swing on a branch of an old oak and the place became ours. We took turns on the tire, played hide and seek and scavenger hunts. Without question, it was ours.
When I arrived I saw Jack sitting up on the old oak, carefully lining up on one branch three Coke cans. Gabe and Larry stood beneath the branch and directed him. I shouted a greeting and all three of them turned their heads towards me.

"Speak of the devil!" Larry grinned "Thought you wouldn't come."

"I wouldn't leave without saying goodbye," I replied also with a smile. "What you up to?"

"Larry found some empty cans in his dad's garage and we want to see who will knock them all down in one throw," joined in Jack. "We don't have many stones so you better go down the road and find some."

"Sure." My voice sounded small. I wasn't keen on going to the highroad. It wasn't busy that time of the day, but if my mother or any of her friends saw me there I would surely receive some spanking and a lecture at home as it was one of the restricted places where I wasn't allowed to play. But I couldn't chicken out in front of my friends.

"I'll go with you," said Gabe. "I'm of no use here anyways."

I nodded and we strolled towards the highroad. I was relieved that he offered to go with me, I suppose he must have guessed what bothered me. His mother, similarly to mine, was overprotective and didn't approve of us running around in such places. He walked beside me, we chatted about me moving away from Lexington, questioning me whether I was scared and whether I'd come back. I promised that I would often write to him and the guys, and visit for the holidays. Eventually we arrived at the roadside. I started picking up some nice round rocks and shoving them

into my pockets. Gabe was doing the same thing. It was sunny and hot, I felt little drops of sweat tickling my forehead. It was almost silent, just birds chirping in the branches of oaks lining the highroad. No car in sight. A perfect summer afternoon. I was about to pick up another stone when I heard Gabe's voice.

"Hey, isn't that your weirdo neighbor's cat?"

I turned around and looked towards the direction he was pointing to. Around six and a half feet from us, a pair of emerald eyes was staring right at us. He was sitting there, its tail curled over its paws and the red collar with a little golden bell on his neck. It was definitely Eerie.

"Oh yeah," I rolled my eyes. "Glad I won't be seeing it anymore. Always creeped me out."

Gabe took another glance at it, looked at me and smiled viciously.

"Let's have a little practice before we go back to the guys," he said flipping a sharp stone in his palm. "Bet you can't hit it from here."

His words startled me. I looked at the cat again. It was now licking its paw and cleaning its head, ignoring our presence. It's true that I wasn't so fond of the furry creature, but I had never meant to cause it any harm. I shook my head.

"No, that wouldn't be right. Let's just go."

I started towards the woods with my pockets full of rocks. I nervously passed by Gabe when he grabbed my arm with a strong grip. I looked at him my eyes widening a bit. He was taller than me and his face closed in.

"Oh? Don't tell me you feel sorry for your sissy neighbor," he hissed. "Or maybe you're a sissy too? I know you've been at his house. I wonder how Jack and Larry will react when they'll learn that you've befriended the weirdo."

I ripped my arm free from his grip and looked at him with disbelief. I knew Gabe could be vile, especially since he was Charlie's worst tormentor. But I never suspected him of going this far.

"I'm not friends with him," I said trying to steady my voice. "I just don't want to take it out on the cat. It didn't do anything."

"Since you're not friends with the weirdo, prove it to me," he said looking at me triumphantly while shoving the stone into my palm. "Do it or I'll tell everyone at school, and you won't have anyone to come back to."

I looked at him with hate. There was a battle inside my head. I didn't know what to do. I glanced at the stone and then at the cat. It was still sitting there unbothered, ignoring us. I didn't want to hurt it. My whole body screamed to not do it. But what I didn't want more was to be tortured in Lexington every time I came around to visit. So I took a deep breath, lifted my uncontrollably shaking hand and threw the rock with all the strength I had.

I almost breathed a sigh of relief when I missed it. I missed by a few inches at most. Then everything happened at once.

Startled by the movement and clack of the stone against the sticks, Eerie sprang to her feet, let out a hiss of fear and bolted towards the road. It was a matter of seconds. In a heartbeat, the car thundered around the bend, its engine a distant roar that became impossibly close. The driver slammed the breaks and there was a loud screeching sound of tires against the gravel. I didn't want to look. I turned my head in time to hear a dull thump, something soft and heavy hitting the ground just behind me.

"Oh shit," I heard Gabe saying in shock. "Run!"

I didn't think twice. I didn't want to look. I just ran with all the strength and speed I had in my legs far away from the highroad while the driver was shouting after us.

The only trace that remained from that day was a stain of blood on the side of my sneakers.

*

It wasn't until two years later that I returned to Lexington. One Monday morning, my mother received mail from her sister, aunt Grace, inviting us for Thanksgiving.

"Must I go, mother?" I asked with reluctance.

"Yes you must. You're not staying alone on Thanksgiving. Besides," she added, "wouldn't you want to visit your friends?"

That was exactly what I dreaded. I had never spoken of that day to anyone. The memory of the accident didn't visit me often, but every time I received a letter from Gabe and the others, or merely thought about Charlie, the old guilt came creeping back towards me.

I tried to convince myself that it hadn't been my fault, but Gabe's and the driver's. Gabe never mentioned the incident in his letters. I never learned what happened afterward, though I could imagine what poor Charlie must have felt when his companion never came home.

When November arrived, my father drove us to Lexington. The town welcomed us under a starry sky, its streets painted by the subtle glow of streetlights. There was almost no movement outside, the cold keeping everyone inside their warm homes.
I watched the sleeping town through the car window, memories flashing back. Larry's house, my old primary school, the corner shop where I used to buy candies during break time. Each one feeling so close, yet so distant.
Eventually, we turned onto the street where we used to live. My gaze caught on a small brick house with a yellow fence. The Sanders' house. My chest tightened. As we passed, I thought I saw a figure standing behind the first floor curtain, faintly outlined by a source of light inside. But the car moved too quickly for me to tell who it was.

“Feels like we left just yesterday, eh?” said my father playfully. “The neighbors must feel lonely without us.”

“This whole place seems so lonely at this time of the year,” my mother replied with a yawn. “Especially with so many dark houses. I wonder whether the Sanders are having the same trouble with selling their place.”

“What do you mean?” I asked with sudden alarm in my voice. “There was someone standing in the window upstairs just now. It must have been Charlie or Mrs. Sanders.”

“Oh?” my mother said surprised, though she didn’t turn to face me. “You must be mistaken dear. The Sanders moved two months after we did. Mrs. Sanders condition got worse, and she had to seek more professional help.”

“What about Charlie?”

“I think a family relative took him in, but I’m not so sure now. Aunt Grace mentioned it once, it must have slipped my mind to tell you.”

I fell silent. I was startled, I was certain that someone had been there. Slowly, I turned for one last look at our street. But everything was still and covered in darkness.

*

With every day in Lexington, I found myself wanting more and more to go home. Each time I stepped outside aunt Grace’s house I could feel eyes on me – someone watching, following. I was becoming paranoid, and I knew it. I kept telling myself that there was nothing there, that I was just imagining things.
At one point I thought one of my old classmates was pulling a prank on me, but I never saw anyone I recognized. And every time my thoughts drifted too far, I somehow ended up at the entrance of my old street, the one I’d sworn to avoid. I knew it was the guilt of the past dragging me back there, like a chain I couldn’t remove.

Finally, I decided I couldn’t stay silent any longer. I had to speak to the one person who knew the truth.

On Tuesday evening I left the house and headed towards Gabe’s place. I wasn’t sure how he would react as I hadn’t written to tell him that I was coming for Thanksgiving. I’d avoided everyone, anxious to run into a familiar face. But I couldn’t keep my sins hidden anymore.

When I was two streets from his house, something rustled in the bushes ahead. I froze. The movement was small, but what stepped out made my throat tighten and let a silent scream escape. It crouched low on its paws. The creature’s flesh was peeling away. Insects crawled through the hollow gaps of its ribs and its missing left eye socket. Its body was sunken and thin, a few patches of sticky fur clinging to what once was skin. I could see its heart somehow still beating and pulsing beneath a swarm of maggots. Its claws dripped with a thick fluid that I could not recognize. It

looked at me with its remaining eye, a yellow orb with no signs of life. The stench hit me, foul and reeking of death, my stomach twisted with nausea.

And then I saw what hung around its neck, a collar with a bell, rusted and broken.

I heard someone calling my name. I turned towards the voice and saw aunt Grace standing at the intersection, waving at me. When I looked back toward the creature, it was gone. Even the air smelled normal again, only damp with the afternoon rain.

*

It was after me. I wanted to believe it was just a nightmare, a product of sleep deprivation. But it was there, creeping on the windowsills, watching me from outside. I was terrified to leave the house, because I knew it was just waiting for one false move. I don't know why it hadn't entered the house, but I called it a demon. A demon that only I could see.

Once I saw it in front of aunt Grace's house and pointed screaming. My mother frowned with concern, and my father called me a prankster.

The demon was after me. Eerie was after me. Charlie's cat was after me. It would not let me live with the mistake I had made. The mistake of parting it from its best friend.

*

I prayed every night, grateful for each morning I woke still alive. I saw the growing concern in my family's eyes, my mother whispering to my father about seeing a psychiatrist right after Thanksgiving. I didn't comment. I didn't want them to think I was losing my mind. I just had to survive until the end of the week.

The day before our departure I was almost crying with joy and relief. Just a few more hours and we'd be leaving this cursed place. I would be free again. Everything would go back to normal. As I was packing my belongings, a soft knock came at my window. I turned around, my whole body trembling. What I saw made me even more surprised. It was Gabe, standing outside with his usual grin and motioning for me to come out.
Hesitant but drawn by some gut feeling, I went to the front door and stepped into the cold evening air. He was now standing by the gate, again signalling for me to follow. I opened my mouth to call out, but before I could speak, he suddenly ran and disappeared behind the tall, green fence.

I chased after him without thinking. He was fast, too fast. I kept shouting his name but he never stopped. Finally, he slowed and turned toward a house. Once again he gestured for me to follow, then slipped into the dark corridor.

Panting I looked up and realized where he led me: the house where I had spent most of my afternoons after school.

I was about to turn and run back to my aunt's house when the air split with a scream of pure terror, coming from the Sanders' house. Then came another. And another.

Clenching my teeth, I sprang toward the door and burst inside, not knowing what I would find. But I was certain that it wouldn't be anything good.

Then the screams stopped.

Inside, there was only silence, deep and deafening.

It was clear that no one had been there for a long time. The furniture was covered in yellowed bed sheets, a thick layer of dust covering the floor. The only tenants were a few lonely spiders, weaving their webs across the empty bookshelves. Everything stood still and switched off, waiting for someone to return and fill the house again with the life and laughter.

Something raced up the stairs, and the air was suddenly thick with the familiar stench of rotting flesh. My body was shivering in fear, but I knew I couldn't leave Gabe to face a certain death. We would leave together. Tonight.
I started toward the stairs when my foot got caught on something. I crashed hard onto the old wooden floorboards, agony bursting through my whole body as the growl of pain escaped my lips. I coughed, choking on the dust that filled the air from my fall.
I lifted my head and slowly turned to look at the cause of my collapse. What I saw made my blood run cold. Something that once was human made a rattling, hollow noise. A white, glistening ribcage with remaining flesh on it. Someone's unfinished dinner.

*

As I reached the top of the stairs my body started shaking with convulsions. I wanted to vomit. I wanted to run and scream, hide and cry for my mother. I wanted all of this to be over. To end this living nightmare. I calmed my roaring thoughts and grabbed the first item that was in sight that could be used for protection. A broken wooden plank, likely from an old bookshelf. I held it tightly, though I knew it wouldn't be of much help. Still, the weight of it made me feel less vulnerable. After taking a couple of deep breaths I stepped into the corridor of the first floor nervously looking around.
But there was nothing, just the smell of damp and dust, and the moonlight spilling through the worm-eaten windows. I walked forward, whispering one name under my breath like a prayer. Gabe. My trembling hand gripped the rusty handle of a door leading into a space that once was filled with children's laughter.
Except when I entered it, there was no sight of stuffed animals or little toy cars. Nothing was the same.

My eyes caught a large drawing on the wooden panels, a circle neatly done in what looked like red paint, marked with strange symbols and letters of an unknown language. They were scribbled all over the walls and floor, twisting like roots of a poisonous flower. Candles burned around it, their

red flames slowly dripping wax into the dust.
In the middle lay a figure of a person, its face down and arms bound. My heart skipped a beat when I saw the familiar ginger curls glimmering in the dim candlelight.
"Gabe!" I whimpered, dropping the plank with a loud thump. I ran towards the body and started shaking it. "Wake up! You have to wake up! Please!"

I turned him over. And screamed with fear.

What stared back at me was not my friend but something hollowed and defiled. One of his deep, ocean eyes was missing and the skin of his body was carved with the same strange symbols. Except the red letters were not painted, but deeply cut into him, the blood still wet, slowly streaming from the slits.

A sacrifice.

A sacrifice to Eerie.

I heard the creak of the floor behind me. Slowly, I turned and saw him.
The face of a grown up boy, who was no longer the frail, mousy kid I remembered. His eyes were filled with hatred and his lips twisting into a smile so wicked it made my knees tremble.

"Hello, old friend," he said.

The last thing I saw was the swing of the wooden plank I had dropped earlier.

Then everything went dark and silent.

*

"Homicide. The boy was a maniac, no question."

"Poor Gabriel, his family will be devastated. Have you made the call, Lieutenant?"

"Yes. Unfortunately, the TV reporters will be here soon. This kind of news spreads fast."

"Do not let them take the boy's photo. He has been through enough. We don't want his mutilated face on the cover of every newspaper. Looks like the sick bastard's waking up."

My head throbbed as I slowly opened my eyes. Everything was spinning: I felt as if I had woken up after a long slumber. I wanted to rub my forehead where I was hit, but as I tried to lift my arm something made a rattling noise. Panicking, I tried to free myself. This was when I realized I was in the back of a police car with handcuffs on.

"Easy there," one of the officers said through the window. "You'll be taken in for questioning. Anything you say can and will be used against you."

"What?" I rasped. "I didn't do anything, let me go!"

“Shut it!” the officer snapped. “I have seen plenty of murders, rapes and assaults. But this… this isn’t something a human would do.”

“It wasn’t me!” I screamed. “It was Charlie Sanders. He hit me! He killed Gabe! He’s got a demon! He is a demon! He has a room full of demonic runes! He made a pact with the devil!”

“Yeah,” muttered the second officer with disgust. “He’s nuts alright.”

I began crying with despair, begging for them to listen. But they just stood there looking at me as if I had some kind of incurable disease.
Then I saw it. Behind the men in police uniforms was the shadow of a boy at the entrance of the Sanders’ home. A cat with missing flesh was purring, rubbing its scalp against Charlie’s leg. He turned and shut the door while the cat followed him.

I begged the officers to turn around, to look at the door, to go and see. See the demon. But they only shook their heads in disbelief.

“Stop playing. The game’s over. No one’s been in that house except for you. Thought no one would notice, huh? Who’s that Charlie Sanders, anyway?”

I cried and begged and cried all over again. Time passed as more and more people were gathering around the Sanders’ house, which apparently never was the Sanders’ house. Neighbors, families, reporters, all shouting, sobbing and grieving.

Eventually the officers got back into the car and started the engine.

“Time to get you to your new home,” one said coldly. “Surely, you’ll enjoy it.”

I am not crazy. I am not crazy. Charlie was my friend. I killed Charlie’s cat. I killed him. But he returned.

They killed Gabe. They sacrificed him. It’s their fault. It’s theirs.

I am innocent. I didn’t do anything. I would never hurt anyone. I am innocent.

I am innocent.

You do believe me… right?

Right?



Oliwia Dawidowska